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AUTHOR Canham, Ronald R.
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ABSTRACT

Citizen involvement in the public decision-making process can be facilitated if appropriate forms and functions of involvement are used. The issue cycle, which can help public officials to ensure that citizens have constructive and timely input into the decision-making process, involves awareness of some condition in the community; community discussions, resulting in the definition of the problem; coalescence of special interests, creating divisions and conflict within the community; open debate among competing interests; establishment of a realistic view of the problem; determination of alternative solutions and their effects; a public decision regarding a course of action; and the implementation of actions. Citizen involvement includes four basic functions: provide or obtain information, interaction with the public, assuring the public, and ritualism. Forms of citizen involvement include public meeting, small workshop, presentation, ad hoc committee, advisory board, key contact, survey, staff report, mass media, and daily contact. Techniques to help encourage citizens to become involved and to make the most of their time and knowledge are to work at building a consensus, reduce the risks of involvement, and develop listening skills. Various principles, functions, and forms of public involvement, and techniques which may be used to obtain more meaningful citizen input are examined. (NQA)

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Ronald R. Canham,
Extension Community Development Specialist,
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Coping with Growth

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Coping with the impacts of rapid community growth is ultimately the responsibility of elected officials. The decisions they make are affected by several factors, including fiscal conditions, human and physical resource availability, and political considerations. Often not given proper attention is the input provided by citizens who will be affected by these decisions. Yet, many community officials are disappointed in the quantity and quality of input local citizens make to the public decisionmaking process.

The purpose of this publication is to examine various principles, functions, and forms of public involvement—and the techniques that public sector officials and professionals may use to obtain more meaningful citizen input in the decisionmaking process.

Involvement

Most people hold the belief that participatory democracy is a fair and just method of arriving at public decisions that affect their lives. Let us reflect for a moment upon the citizen's role in this process.

Involvement requires that a person be present and active in the decisionmaking process. There is a high degree of listening, debating, sharing, commitment, and conflict. Involved citizens take risks; they have a stake in the decisionmaking process, and the outcome of their involvement will determine the degree to which they are to be punished or rewarded for taking an active part.

When we speak of citizen input in this publication, we are referring to those who are *involved* in the decisionmaking process—not those simply participating through elected or designated representatives, nor acting as sympathetic observers without committing much in the way of time, money, or prestige.[1]

Why is citizen involvement important?

The goal of any attempt to involve local citizenry should be to achieve a better decision for the community—one which will have support and commitment over time. Meaningful involvement can also bring about public decisions more responsive to local needs, the initiation of community improvements, and a sense of pride and making a difference in one's own community.

From the citizen's viewpoint, there are several reasons why meaningful involvement is desirable. Lack of faith and trust in public officials has prompted many citizens to take a more active role in influencing public decisions. Rapid growth in the number of special interest groups desiring access to the decisionmaking process has also increased the demand for more meaningful involvement. Coalitions of special interests are becoming much more common, as people discover they have been locked out of certain decisions or have lost an end product that was desired. This creates a stronger awareness of the positive aspects of presenting a united vocal front to achieve common purposes. But basically, as problems and the decisions to resolve them become more complex, it is often a person's desire to feel that some control is retained. Understanding of the forces that affect the citizen and his community has increased recognition of the need for methods of more meaningful involvement.

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[1] Yankersley, Howard, "Some Thoughts on Citizen Involvement in Public Decision Making," Extension Service, USDA, Washington, D.C., February, 1976, p. 3.

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Communities—especially those facing the complicated and often unpredictable impacts of rapid growth—will demand a voice as public decisions become more costly, complex, visible, and irreversible in relation to the citizens' own personal needs and wants.

Common complaints

Despite increased demands for citizen involvement in public decisionmaking, little has been done to make traditional practices for eliciting and using citizen input more responsive to concerned community groups and individuals. Present efforts to obtain input are still aimed at promoting passive participation—not active involvement. The most common criticisms leveled at citizen involvement as it is currently practiced are:

- Those who complain most get the most service;
- Organized groups carry more influence than those groups or individuals not well organized;
- The current process for involvement is too formal;
- Citizens, not agencies needing the input, must initiate any acts of involvement;
- Many of the *right* people (i.e., those affected by decisions being made) who should be contacted and encouraged to get involved are not;
- Involvement often occurs after the fact (i.e., an agency has made a decision that it wants to sell to the public);
- The benefit of involvement is seldom identifiable;
- Involvement often results in a more complicated and lengthy decisionmaking process.

If some or all of the above complaints are true, what can public officials do to make involvement more meaningful for those citizens concerned about or impacted by public decisions?

Public Official's Role

A key question: *When and where should officials and citizens enter jointly into public decisionmaking?*

The traditional response has been to "involve citizens in public issues at the beginning of the decisionmaking process." However, communities generally deal with several public policy issues simultaneously. Each issue will have consequences that will be influenced by and affect local residents who want to maximize the positive impacts of any decisions made.[2] If the issues are growth related, then the impacts and their distribution are of even greater concern—because growth will invariably benefit some segments of the community and damage others. Add to this the fact that growth-related decisions are often based on too little information, have long-term effects on people's lives, and create community conflict; hence, it becomes critical for officials to involve citizens in community issues at the proper point and in the proper manner.[3]

An economist at Iowa State University has identified a process that characterizes how communities deal with the impacts of public decisionmaking. It is called *the issue cycle.*[4] Recognizing this cycle can help officials to ensure that citizens have more constructive and timely input into the decisionmaking process.

[2] Florea, Bruce, "The Public Policy Process: Its Role in Community Growth," Western Rural Development Center.

[3] Ibid., p. 1.

[4] Gratto, Charles B., "Public Policy Education—A Model With Emphasis on How," in *Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies—1973,* Farm Foundation, Chicago, pp. 40-49.

The Issue Cycle

1. People become disturbed by some condition in the community. Concerns begin to surface as community dissatisfaction rises. In a rapidly growing area, such concerns may be caused by the inadequate provision of public services, overcrowded schools, inadequate police and fire protection, etc.

2. The concern leads to community discussions, which result in the definition of a problem to be resolved. At this stage the definition is based largely on myths, value preferences, and very little factual data. The "issue" is frequently referred to in terms of a solution. For example, a rapidly growing community may define a medical services issue as "needing a new hospital." In reality, the problem is probably inadequate medical services; building a hospital would be one possible solution. It is critical that public officials work with citizens at this stage to aid in defining the problem correctly and providing information that will help to dispel opinions based on myths and folk knowledge.

3. Special interests coalesce, creating divisions and conflict within the community over what needs to be done and the best method for doing it. Public officials must exercise caution here in their decisionmaking role. In addition to identifying the appropriate forms of citizen involvement and functions that will be served, officials must decide if their own role will be client- or issue-oriented.[5] Client-oriented intervention places the official in the role of *advocating* an interest group's position. The result can only be a win/lose situation for the citizens involved. In the issue-oriented approach, the official acts as an *educator,* facilitating the process of problem identification, soliciting input from many diverse community viewpoints, and assisting citizens in collecting the information necessary to make a rational choice.

4. Open debate among competing interests, facilitated by the proper forms of involvement established by public officials, leads to a ranking of impact priorities. This sets the stage for resolution of the issue.

5. A realistic view of the problem is established. Good, objective data may help the community develop a consensus about an issue, its nature, and structure. Value preferences still cause differences of opinion—but there is at least agreement as to what the problem is. Too often, public officials do not communicate with citizens until this stage. By then it may be almost impossible to bring objective data to bear on citizens' subjective definitions of the problem and opinions about what should be done and what impacts will result.

6. Alternative solutions and their effects are determined. Citizens must be reminded that their choices for issue resolution must be weighed against other factors, such as available resources and political feasibility. What is critical is that officials have ensured ample opportunity for citizen input into the decisionmaking process.

7. A public decision regarding a course of action is made. This may or may not agree with priority solutions selected by involved citizens.

8. The actions are implemented. At this point, still a different type of management problem may be encountered.

[5] Ibid., pp. 43-46.

9. **The actions are then evaluated,** based on how accurately the projected impacts held true. If citizens are satisfied with results, the issue subsides. But if unexpected costs and impacts arise, the cycle is resumed and another course of action is taken.

Making Citizen Involvement More Meaningful

Functions

Soliciting public input without knowing why or what is desired is seldom beneficial to the public or to those making decisions. Knowing *why* involvement is desired also goes a long way in determining the best *forms* or *methods* of citizen input to implement. Four basic functions of citizen involvement have been identified:[6]

- **To provide or obtain information.** Techniques should differ here, depending on whether an agency has information to disseminate or desires information from the public to help make a decision.

- **Interaction with the public.** This function helps promote the sharing of information and exchange of ideas between the public and a decisionmaking agency. Communication is two-way, with the main goal being citizens and decisionmakers working together.

- **Assuring the public** will result in community interest groups and concerned individuals being sure that their viewpoints have been heard and will be taken into account in the decisionmaking process.

- **Ritualism.** There may be little demand for public input by either the decisionmakers or the citizenry. But in order to meet legal requirements, to promote the appearance of following democratic processes, or to convince the community that decisions have been arrived at openly—public input is sought. Meetings serving the ritualistic function are usually poorly attended, poorly conducted, and effective input into the final decision is often negligible. Unfortunately, this is the function most often met through traditional involvement techniques.

Forms of citizen involvement

Given the functions described above, public officials have at their disposal a wide range of alternative forms of citizen involvement. The following chart lists these possible forms of involvement and evaluates them as to how well they serve all four functions.

An effective citizen involvement program will contain some mixture of the following forms that meets all four functions, and is also representative of the special interest groups and individuals who will be affected by public decisions.

Skills that promote meaningful involvement

Identifying the appropriate function and utilizing the most desirable form of citizen involvement can help ensure that the framework for gathering input will be flexible and responsive to the needs of citizens. But skills and techniques are needed that encourage citizens to become involved and to make the most of their time and knowledge once they become active.

People respond when there is an appeal to their basic needs.[7] Efforts should be made to let citizens know why their input is needed, and how agency goals are compatible with their individual goals. Only after this link is established will citizens perceive a reason to become involved and work actively to provide information for decisionmakers.

Too often, officials seeking citizen input neglect the fact that they are dealing with people volunteering their time and energies. A minimal effort to involve citizens calls for no more than making a public announcement about when and where a meeting to obtain citizen input will be held. But this implies that anyone able to get to the meetingplace is welcome to attend. In theory, this might suffice, but obtaining meaningful input requires decisionmakers to do some *selective recruiting* of citizen volunteers. There will always be an "interested minority" of citizens concerned about a particular issue. This minority will be made up of those groups and individuals who are affected by a policy decision, must pay for that decision, are knowledgeable in that subject area, or are specified by law to be involved. The agency or official responsible for making a policy decision must identify, contact, and encourage these vested interest groups to become involved.

Once the "interested minority" has been contacted, what can be done to retain their involvement? Some simple techniques can help.

a. Work at building a consensus. This skill is most basic for public decisionmakers. Consensus-building is the *art of compromise*—getting competing interests to continue to redefine alternative courses of action until the result reflects something that everyone wants. This makes everyone a winner, and encourages citizens to remain actively involved because they can relate the group's decision to their own needs. On the other hand, merely holding a vote to determine citizen support of potential actions will most likely result in winners and losers—with the losers probably withdrawing from future involvement.

Form of Involvement	Give Information	Obtain Information	Interaction	Public Assurance	Ritualism	Representation
Public Meeting	Good	Poor	Poor	Fair	Yes	Poor-Fair
Small Workshop	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Yes	Good Potential
Presentation	Good	Fair	Fair	Fair	Yes	No Assurance
Ad Hoc Committee	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Yes	Good Potential
Advisory Board	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Yes	Good Potential
Key Contact	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	No	No Assurance
Survey	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Fair	Yes	Good Potential
Staff Report	Poor	Good	Poor	Poor	No	No Assurance
Mass Media	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor	Yes	Poor
Daily Contact	Good	Good	Excellent	Fair	No	Poor

[6] Heberlein, Thomas A., "Principles of Public Involvement," Staff Paper in Rural and Community Development, University of Wisconsin Extension, April, 1975, pp. 15-23.

[7] Dunn, Douglas T., "Motivating People to Participate," Q-346, Part 3, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Service, 1974, pp. CD 4-7.

b. Reduce the risks of involvement.[8] This can be accomplished in many ways. Meeting citizens in surroundings familiar to them and in a physical setting conducive to open discussion will help. People are more comfortable and willing to talk in surroundings they know. Speaking in front of large groups, which often necessitates the use of a microphone, should be avoided. If a meeting is larger than twenty people, break down into small discussion groups to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

Risk can be further reduced by setting informal ground rules. Parliamentary procedure often makes the framework for discussion too formal and solution-oriented. Informal guidelines—such as limiting individual speaking time to a few minutes and reminding people to address the subject at hand—are often much more effective. Citizens will also perceive less risk in becoming involved if they are well informed. Publicize meeting agendas well in advance, and disseminate policy-related information through mailings, mass media, and outside resource experts prior to actual calls for citizen input. This will help produce open, policy-related discussion.

c. Develop listeninng skills. Good listening—by both public officials and involved citizens—can reduce unnecessary conflict among competing interests and show the public that their input *is* having an impact. Use a newsprint display pad to record key comments and acknowledge that you understand the points being made. Putting key ideas in writing before the group reinforces their perception that citizen input is being heard, and will be considered when a course of action is chosen. A good ground rule to use is the reflecting technique, whereby a person cannot make his point until he has clearly stated the last person's comments in his own words. This will ensure that misunderstandings are kept to a minimum.

Finally, officials in charge of public involvement functions should refrain from making judgmental statements about a person's comments. A person's opinions are based on values and beliefs. Being told that those values are wrong will only discourage future participation and defeat the intended purpose of seeking involvement: that is, to gather citizen input that will lead to better public policy decisions.

Conclusion

Democratic processes mandate that citizens have the opportunity to make input into the public decision-making process. Their involvement can only be meaningful if both they and public officials understand *why their input is important.* Answering this "why" can be made easier if appropriate forms and functions of involvement are used, along with knowledge of the group and personal communication skills that facilitate citizen involvement in the public decisionmaking process.

[8] Dunn, Douglas T., "Motivation: Avoidance of Risk," paper prepared for the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Service, 1977, pp. 12-13.

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